Displaced Communities, Environmental Change and Sustainable Livelihoods in Uganda

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Policy Briefing

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- This Policy Briefing summarises research findings, recommendations and actions for government and other stakeholders working towards sustainable environments and livelihoods in refugee hosting areas in Uganda.
- The research highlights urgent need for actions to address environmental change in and around refugee settlements to ensure landscape restoration takes place alongside creating sustainable livelihoods for refugee and host communities.
- The project employed a novel combination of social science and remote sensing methods to identify change, interventions and targeted responses; see the Final Report for full details.
- The findings identify targeted responses across six key areas of recommendations: settlement and land-use planning; cross-sectoral collaboration; environmental and livelihood interventions; land and natural resource use rights; community participation and sustainable resources; and landscape restoration.
- Findings and recommendations are the outcome of a 2019-2021 collaboration between the Universities of Dundee, UK and Makerere, Uganda supported by an Advisory Board formed of key representatives from Ugandan government and stakeholders.

1. Introduction

Uganda is one of the top refugee-hosting countries globally and the largest in Africa, a product of geopolitical context and progressive refugee laws and policy. Refugees in Uganda are afforded freedom of movement, the right to work, the provision of social services, and are allocated land for residential and agricultural use in settlements. High dependence on natural resources to meet needs for shelter, food, fuel, and income generation has caused environmental change and degradation in and around refugee settlements. Increasing demand for fuelwood and timber amongst growing populations puts strain on forest resources, threatening biodiversity and the provision of ecosystem services critical to livelihoods. Yet these dynamics differ depending on socio-cultural, political-economic and ecological factors specific to settlement contexts. This report generates a nuanced view of environment–livelihood interactions, informing recommendations for protracted refugee contexts. The research aims to: 'Explore how displacement impacts on environmental change and the subsequent development of sustainable livelihoods' through a series of objectives examining environmental change and the ways in which refugee and host communities interact and use surrounding landscapes, from which a series of policy recommendations have been derived.

Enhanced Sentinel-2 satellite image of Bugoma Forest Reserve, adjacent to Kyangwali settlement, Uganda, 2021. (Source: European Space Agency).

2. Research Context

Following consultation, two settlements were chosen as research sites: Kyangwali (Kikuube district) was established in 1960 and primarily hosts refugees from DRC; and Bidibidi (Yumbe district), established in 2016 after an influx of refugees from South Sudan, and is now the largest settlement in Uganda. Differing population dynamics, cultural contexts, natural resource availability, diversity of livelihood practices and environmental change dynamics facilitated comparison between sites.

3. Methodology

The research adopted a mixed methods approach, using social science and remote sensing methods to explore and quantify the interactions between livelihoods and environmental change. A pilot survey influenced the design of semi-structured interviews with 116 refugee and host community members. Participatory mapping activities were carried out with 25 groups separated by age, gender and refugee status. 30 key informant interviews were held with stakeholders at local and inter/national levels, including government, UN agencies and NGOs. In response to Advisory Board feedback, a large settlement-scale household survey was

Participants engage in a participatory mapping exercise in Bidibidi.

undertaken in both locations, generating data on household composition, land and farming, livelihoods and income, and environmental use and degradation.

The scale of habitat, land cover and landscape change over 40 years was determined through analysis of satellite remotely-sensed imagery. A combination of land cover classification methods and change in vegetation indices was used to derive maps and trends in forest and land cover change in and around both settlements. To account for differences in ecological settings and land cover types, different classification approaches were adopted for each location.

4. Environmental Change

Kyangwali's shrubland and dense vegetation reduced in extent between 2015 and 2021. There is a clear reduction in 'landscape greenness', and the extent of tree cover in the area of Bugoma Forest adjacent to Kyangwali decreased by 7.5%. Limited land for agricultural production contributes to these changes, refugees being settled in areas historically used by hosts for cultivation and grazing, whilst refugee plot sizes are decreasing. Despite access restrictions in Bugoma Forest, both refugees and hosts enter illegally to obtain fuelwood and timber. Additionally, charcoal production for household use and sale contributes to tree decline. In Bidibidi, landscape fragmentation and tree cover loss has increased significantly between 2015 and 2021. Tree and shrub land cover has reduced by more than 50%, and the mean patch size of remaining tree covered areas has reduced to just 11% of the 2015 value. Residential areas and bare ground have increased, whilst cleared forest has yet to regenerate. Land affected by bush burning has almost doubled in area, impacting the semi-natural mosaic of land cover and driving dynamic changes in land cover year-on-year. Tree loss is largely driven by demand for firewood, although refugees also cut trees for dwelling construction. Firewood access challenges mean that demand for charcoal is increasing. Both communities produce charcoal for household use, but the activity is also driven by demand from larger urban centres. Livelihood activities such as stone quarrying and brickmaking (often seasonal responses to crop farming challenges) also contribute to the increase in cleared areas and loss of tree cover in Bidibidi.

"Tree and shrub land cover reduced by more than 50% in Bidibidi between 2015 and 2021 and mean patch size of remaining tree covered areas has reduced to just 11% of the 2015 value."

5. Creating Sustainable Livelihoods

Access to agricultural land and natural resources is a livelihood challenge. Forest encroachment is stimulated by poverty and a lack of non-natural resource-based livelihood strategies. There are marked differences in land ownership, with refugees at both sites having to borrow or rent land from hosts. This is more common in Bidibidi where conflicts over farmland access are frequent and refugees suffer crop losses caused by host community cattle. Refugees are heavily dependent on host community legitimisation for access to natural resources, perpetuating refugee vulnerability.

In Kyangwali, access restrictions to Bugoma Forest impact on livelihood options, and risks associated with seeking forest products include gender-based violence. Despite intercommunity tensions and conflicts with state actors in Kyangwali, refugees' close proximity to Bugoma Forest means they are relatively autonomous from neighbouring host communities.

Refugee response programmes geared toward environmental protection have included environmental sensitisation and education. Communities understand deforestation as a critical issue, referring to the value of trees in terms of their direct benefits (e.g. fuelwood) and role in climate regulation, although broader biodiversity values are often overlooked. Contrary to perceptions that refugees lack a long-term stake in local ecological wellbeing, this research shows that the majority of refugees in Bidibidi planted trees in the past year. However, refugees report a lack of space to plant trees, lack of resources for maintenance and monitoring of tree survival.

At the national level, funding shortfalls and large refugee/host populations mean environmental objectives are often omitted from refugee interventions; or re-prioritised when impacted by external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Policy delivery has also suffered from a lack of collaboration between sectors.

Local level corruption facilitates deforestation due to insecure land and natural resource rights, exacerbated by the erosion of traditional authority and power to combat environmentally harmful activities. Particularly in Bidibidi, the arrival of refugees has highlighted fragility in traditional governance structures, leading to land and natural resource disputes between communities. In Kyangwali, hosts claim customary land has been sold by local leaders in collaboration with government and refugee representatives.

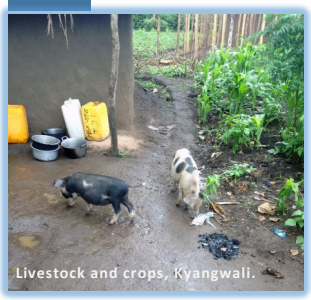
6. Conclusion

Our findings show that environmental changes are partly driven by local population pressures and associated natural resource-based livelihoods, particularly household demand for fuelwood and timber. Yet the analysis indicates that inter/national political –economic factors also drive change. Efforts to combat environmental change around settlements has also been hampered by a lack of sectoral collaboration.

Recommendations		Actions	
1. Settlement and land-use planning			
1.1	Government partners and development agencies work together to develop a plan guiding decisions on establishment of new settlements and location of new refugees. This should be based upon potential natural resource availability and requirements, and environmental impact assessments.	1.1.1	OPM, MWE, MLHUD, MLG, NEMA and NFA, along with UNHCR, UNDP and FAO, should develop a national scale settlement planning tool to guide decisions on locating new refugees and settlements.
		1.1.2	MLHUD, NEMA, MLG, and NFA should demarcate areas that can host refugees and IDPs e.g. per district, together with their corresponding estimate of natural resource provision.
		1.1.3	OPM, NEMA, MLHUD, MLG, MWE and NFA to undertake Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs) at potential settlement locations prior to their inclusion in the national scale settlement planning tool.
1.2	Strategic settlement and land-use plans should ensure provision for at least 1 acre of woodlot per 100 households to satisfy household demand for firewood and timber, as in the MWE sector response plan.	1.2.1	OPM, MLG, NEMA, UNHCR, FAO and UNDP to undertake ESIAs at existing refugee settlements and ensure resulting Environment Action Plans (EAPs) and woodlot provisions are implemented.
2. Cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination on environment and livelihoods			
2.1	Closer partnership and collaboration between government sectors and agencies is required in order to address interlinked socio-environmental challenges.	2.1.1	Cabinet Policy Committee on the Environment, its working groups and sub-committees, should monitor collaboration between government sectors on issues of environmental management in refugee settlements.
2.2	Important environmental stakeholders, coordinated through NEMA, should be included from the outset in policy processes related to environmental management in refugee settlements.	2.2.1	Natural Resources, Environment, Climate Change, Land and Water Management Programme Working Group to align its objectives and operations with national government sector policies and guidelines and that membership includes representatives of host and refugee communities.
2.3	Improved coordination amongst implementing partners (IPs) to avoid programme duplication and resource wastage.	2.3.1	Department of Refugees and District governments should continue to work closely to avoid duplication, strengthen coordination and ensure optimal allocation of resources across all IPs operating in settlements.
		2.3.2	All partners target and direct funding towards long-term projects better suited to long-term environmental goals, rather than multiple short term projects.
3. Environmental and Livelihood Interventions			
3.1	Interventions should be directed towards supporting livelihood diversification in host and refugee communities through vocational skills, enterprise selection and training aligned to NDP III and based on market assessment by Ministry of Gender, Labour & Social Development (MGLSD).	3.1.1	OPM and development partners target interventions toward harnessing existing host and refugee knowledge and skills that reduce dependency on natural resource-based livelihoods.
3.2	Environmental sensitisation and education programmes are required to reverse current trends, and local/national government awareness programmes about environmental stewardship and degradation should be implemented.	3.2.1	OPM and UNHCR to implement distribution of energy saving technologies and training as part of the essential items package given to all new refugees at reception.
		3.2.2	UNHCR ensure refugees are sensitised on, and included in, processes of 'tree marking' in order to reduce conflict with host communities.
3.3	Interventions should be site- and context-specific, and may even vary within a particular settlement depending on differing environment–livelihood interactions between zones/villages.	3.3.1	OPM and NEMA should target environmental interventions including community sensitisation around the ecological impact of bush burning in locations such as Bidibidi.
3.4	Broader political-economic drivers of degradation need to be addressed, including urban and international charcoal demand and improvements made in the provision of and sensitisation around affordable alternative fuel technologies.	3.4.1	District officers and government should reduce demand for charcoal in urban areas (particularly those neighbouring refugee hosting areas) through sensitisation on, and incentives for the use of alternative fuel technologies.
		3.4.2	MWE, UPF, Uganda Revenue Authority and cross-border agencies to target the informal border trade of charcoal.
		3.4.3	OPM and Ugandan Parliament and should consider formulating legislation to ban the export of charcoal.
		3.4.4	NFA to explore sustainable methods of charcoal production for local markets, through the use of fast-growing woodlots and cooperative production as an alternative source of livelihoods.

ABBREVIATIONS

CF: Community Forests
CFM: Collaborative Forest Management
CFR: Central Forest Reserve
ESIAs: Environmental and Social Impact Assessments
EAPs: Environment Action Plans
FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization (United Nations)
IPs: Implementing partners
MGLSD: Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development
MLG: Ministry of Local Government
MLHUD: Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development
MWE: Ministry of Water and Environment
NEMA: National Environment Management Authority
NFA: National Forestry Authority
OPM: Office of the Prime Minister
UNDP: United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR: UN High Commissioner for Refugees


Livestock and crops, Kyangwali.


Wood for sale, Bidibidi.

Recommendations		Actions	
4. Land and natural resource use rights			
4.1	Stakeholders should work with host and refugee communities to formalise land and natural resource access and sharing arrangements and address locally-specific issues such as bush burning and crop damage by livestock.	4.1.1	OPM, MWE, MLHUD and NFA to work alongside IPs to help host and refugee communities draft agreements clarifying land and natural resource access rights for refugees in host community areas.
5. Community participation in forest and natural resource management			
5.1	In accordance with Ugandan forest policy and legislation, NFA and forest user groups should work toward CFM arrangements to share forest rights, responsibilities and benefits, and support the sustainable management of forest resources.	5.1.1	NFA and development partners should encourage formation of forest user groups among refugee communities in Kyangwali and enter into MoUs for participation in CFM in Bugoma CFR working alongside existing agreements with host communities.
5.2	In accordance with Ugandan forest policy and legislation, work toward the declaration of CFs on customary land, creating designated community-level institutions responsible for the sustainable use and management of forest resources.	5.2.1	NFA District forest officers to assist host communities and refugees to form & register communal land associations and gazette CFs on customary land.
		5.2.2	NFA should seek funds from and collaborate with development partners such as UNHCR and UNDP to allocate sufficient financial and human resources to support actions 5.2.3, 5.2.4 and 5.2.5.
		5.2.3	NFA and development partners should promote CFM and CF programmes.
		5.2.4	NFA and development partners should introduce gender-sensitive training for government forest rangers and community forest officers to ensure human rights are respected.
		5.2.5	NFA and development partners should harness local knowledge through conservation activities including environmental education and monitoring, for example training refugees as community forest officers alongside host community members.
6. Sustainable resources and landscape restoration			
6.1	Woodlots should be consolidated and planted adjacent to Bugoma CFR and on customary land in both settlements to provide household firewood and timber, incorporating agroforestry approaches allowing refugees to grow short rotation crops amongst trees.	6.1.1	NFA and district forest officers to assist communities with the planting and consolidation of woodlots through CFM arrangements in and adjacent Bugoma CFR, and gazetting of CFs on customary land in both settlements.
		6.1.2	NFA and development partners should create ecological awareness to plant promote use of indigenous species crucial to ecosystem health rather than exotic species for household use.
		6.1.3	NFA and IPs to implement effective aftercare, monitoring and protection for trees planted, with significant community involvement and ownership through collaborative management approaches.
		6.1.4	NFA should promote restoration of recent forest loss around Bidibidi.
6.2	Research commissioned into best practice for forest and landscape restoration in refugee hosting landscapes to maximise use of limited financial resources and incorporates refugee and host community views to ensure successful outcomes.	6.2.1	OPM and Cabinet Policy Committee on the Environment should commission continued research to ensure evidence-based best practice for landscape restoration, taking into account scale of degradation, land ownership issues, potential community benefits, biodiversity, and natural resources.

DISPLACED COMMUNITIES, ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE AND SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS IN UGANDA

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FOR MORE DETAIL ON THE PROJECT PLEASE SEE THE FINAL REPORT:
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